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*Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*

# A Missed Chance to Rein In Israel

When President Reagan ruled out punitive measures against Israel and decided instead to reserve sanctions for later use, he made a fateful decision not to strike when the iron was hottest that he may bitterly regret in days to come.

Secretary of State George Shultz convinced Reagan that after the PLO guerrilla leaders finally leave Beirut, U.S. pressures will be needed to compel Israel to get out of Lebanon and give the Palestinians full autonomy on the West Bank. The anti-Israel sanctions not used last week will be available.

But that sounds like tough talk to cover the timid U.S. response to Israeli flouting of Reagan's desperate appeal for an "in-place" cease-fire. When the time comes for U.S. pressure on Israel for an overall Middle East settlement, there may be less support here for sanctions and more backing in Israel for Prime Minister Menachem Begin. The moment for U.S. determination to control its headstrong little ally may have been lost.

That moment surely was at hand late last Wednesday during a classified CIA-State Department briefing for senators. Less than 24 hours earlier, Israeli armor broke into West Beirut in defiance of Reagan's personal appeal to Israeli Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir on Aug. 2. Judging from the senators' reaction to the administration's cautious tone, a corner seemed to have been turned in the American political attitude toward Israel.

Ambassador Richard Fairbanks, one of the administration briefers, under heavy questioning repeatedly implied that sanctions were out for now. Sen. David Boren reworded the question: if not sanctions, are any other punitive actions being considered? Fairbanks refused to answer yes or no. He finally choked off the questions by saying he had been "instructed" not to answer and that Shultz was the only official authorized to discuss that matter.

Three staunch pro-Israeli senators present—Alan Cranston (a 1984 Democratic presidential hopeful), Howard Metzenbaum and Rudy Boschwitz—were bucking the tide. Otherwise, the sentiment of senators strongly favored any punishment Reagan might propose. When Boren said that his anger was aimed at Begin and not Israel, another Democratic senator responded: "Begin could go down in history as the man who destroyed Israel."

That shows the high degree of support for Reagan and Shultz had they decided on sanctions or some lesser punishment last week. But the administration decided that if Israel had been punished last week, in the words of one official, "they could have gone for eight months without another dime or another bullet from us." Worse, he said, sanctions would have "maximized the paranoia" in Israel, "cemented" the Israeli people behind Begin and possibly triggered all-out invasion of West Beirut.

That decision, however, risks a buildup of Begin's prestige. He will likely be credited for the exodus of PLO leaders from Beirut, the destruction of the PLO's arsenal and the end of any PLO threat to northern Israel.

"No matter how it happens," one administration insider told us, "Begin is going to look the hero when the Beirut tragedy runs its final course." That would produce heightened Begin popularity and credibility both in Israel and in the American Jewish community. If Reagan then decides to reach up to the shelf for the sanctions weapon, he may find it out of reach.

There would then be no nightly television drama of the battle of Beirut, no hospitals blowing up, no civilians dying. The PLO leadership and 6,000 guerrilla fighters would then be gone from Lebanon, scattered far and wide. The Lebanon invasion, given the transitory nature of events in the television age, would have faded from memory.

A Reagan decision then to play the sanctions card would likely be trumped by political reality. American voters would not be moved by Israel's failure to withdraw from Lebanon as they have been outraged by Israeli air attacks on West Beirut. With the Nov. 2 U.S. election nearer, politicians would be less critical of Israeli policy.

Thus, a turning point that might have restored a more natural balance in the relationship of the superpower to its tiny democratic ally may have been lost by timidity and poor timing.